

E

415

W42

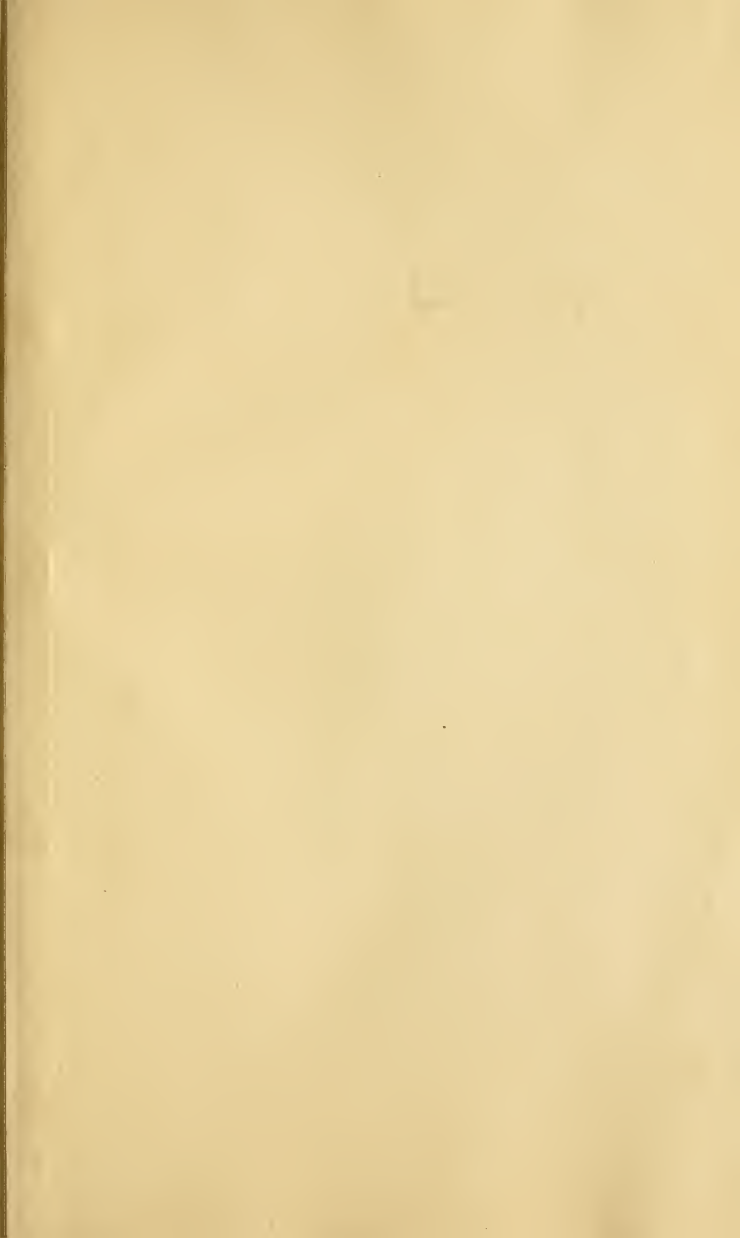
Weiss, John  
a fast day  
sermon





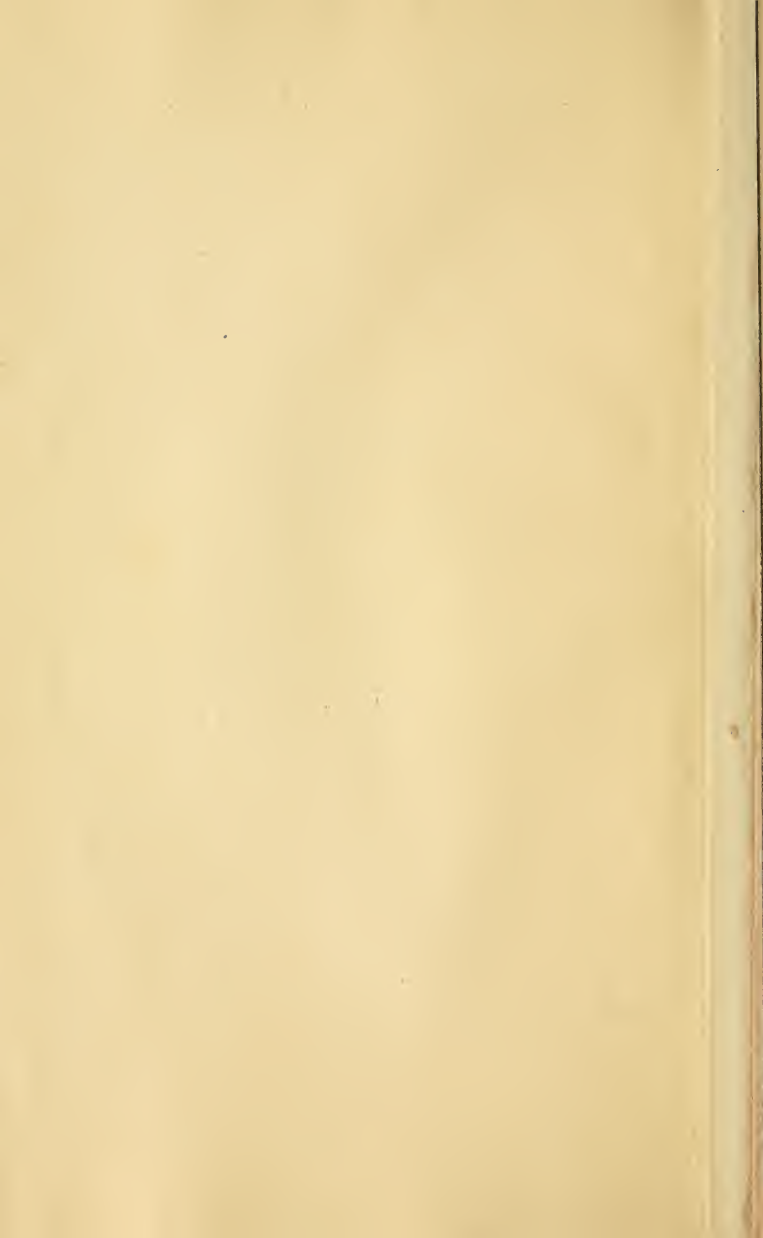
Class E 415

Book . W 42









CONSCIENCE THE BEST POLICY.

---

A

FAST-DAY SERMON,

PREACHED ON APRIL 6, 1848.

BY JOHN WEISS,

Pastor of the First Congregational Church, New Bedford.

---

NEW BEDFORD :  
PRESS OF HENRY TILDEN,  
EVENING BULLETIN OFFICE.  
1848.





CONSCIENCE THE BEST POLICY.

1



A

715  
—  
810

# FAST-DAY SERMON,

PREACHED ON APRIL 6, 1848.



BY JOHN WEISS,

Pastor of the First Congregational Church, New Bedford.



NEW BEDFORD:  
PRESS OF HENRY TILDEN,  
EVENING BULLETIN OFFICE.  
1848.

E 415  
W42

74284

# S E R M O N .

---

ACTS XXIV. 16.

A CONSCIENCE VOID OF OFFENCE.

UPON an occasion like the present, there are always special grounds which occur to us, as authorizing its observance ; and they should be distinctly named as the objects of our meditation, if we mean that the occasion shall be any thing more than an empty form. It is pleasant to find these grounds stated in the civil document which has called us together, and which is thus elevated from its bare official style, into an earnest protest and a sincere confession. Circumstances have lent a weighty import to such clauses as the following :—“ Reason and revelation pronounce that all men are sinners, and that communities, as well as individuals, commit sins and do wrongs, for which they ought to repent, and from which they ought to refrain.” And again : “ Let us pray that He will speedily restore peace between this and a sister republic, and open the way for giving liberty to the millions of the human race now wearing the chain of slavery in our own land.” The present proclamation is a fair and manly one, because it calls things by their right names, and invites us to entertain feelings of sincere humiliation, because we uphold such things as slavery and war. This is as it should be ; it recognizes the fact that we do uphold them, not delicately,

in the abstract, but wickedly, in the concrete. Particularly in the matter of slavery, must we rejoice at the silent change which has taken place in this Commonwealth, and whose tide now cannot be rolled back. It is the beautiful fruit of a most unpopular agitation, which, however, is fast losing its right to that epithet, as it penetrates all the political parties and slowly regenerates them. This is its proper mission; and when we compare the present tone of public sentiment with that of ten years ago, or even five, we shall learn to reverence the power of truth, though it may have been preached to us by men whose meat, some think, is locusts. Their talk has had a savor of health and salvation to us; *wild honey*, if you choose, yet still full of exhilarating strength. Let us renounce our private tastes and feelings, and honorably lend our influence to their cause. The day will then soon come when our chief magistrate's fast proclamation will be one paragraph the shorter, since we shall have repented of being accessories to this great sin.

We are partly indebted to the agitation above alluded to, for the unpopularity of the present war. Men see more clearly the policy of peculiar institutions; they feel more keenly to what lengths it will go, and to what crimes it will commit the country. The majority of men in Massachusetts do not like to be called upon to support this war, because they are more anti-slavery than they used to be; therefore, whatever may be their opinions upon war, they dislike fighting for a dubious cause. There is still a reminiscence of the revolution in men's hearts; and the bare thought, that the sons of patriots are expected to aid and comfort a war for the benefit of slavery, causes the ancient blood to mount up and show its indignation on the cheek. For a clear exposure of the drift of the present war, and of southern policy in general, we are indebted to

the anti-slavery agitation. It has opened the eyes of men in every party, some of whom are ashamed to confess to whom they are indebted, while others acknowledge it with gladness. This unpopular fanaticism is gradually consolidating the opinion of the north, and southern statesmen ill disguise their new solicitude beneath their sneers. If you dislike the movement because it is unpopular, join it, and the objection will disappear. But it is no longer in our control; we may advance, but we cannot seriously retard it. The growth of its lusty youth is bursting the green withes of prejudice and apathy, and it will become a terrible presence in our country, restoring her to the memory of her youth, and shaming her from the things which have seduced her from allegiance to her own ideas. Never forget that story of the poor, rude fishermen, whose bold, unpopular speech, made martyrs of themselves, but victors of their thoughts. Do you not see the painted butterfly spring from the ruins of its former lowly life? So do unpopular disciples carry swathed within themselves, nurse by their sufferings, emancipate by their death, the majestic truth. Do not crush the chrysalis; let the history of Christianity teach us to despise nothing because it is unpopular. It is poor policy to wait for our children to proclaim, that what we laughed at was the solemn truth of God; and it is one ground for humiliation to-day, that we still permit ourselves to be deceived by appearances, and to hold back a little for want of honest thought.

At first, it seems as if this lingering war was the great cause for humiliation, and that we should feel contrite at not having more sternly opposed its inception and progress. Whether or not it began in an act of executive usurpation, beyond our control, we still must feel that upon us depended its continuance, because with us rested the question of supplies. And here is ground for humiliation: we might,

through conscientious representatives, have so steadfastly refused a cent for the prosecution of an unjust deed, that the executive would have been crippled, and its policy defeated. This has been the practical point ever since the war commenced. A distinguished statesman said, in Fanueil Hall, that "nobody voted for the war, but that it was forced upon us by an unconstitutional act of the executive." Yet, did nobody vote for the supplies, and are not the supplies the sinews of war? If we had done our duty in this respect, the war could not have been forced upon us: so that it is nothing but a subterfuge to say that nobody voted for the war, merely because they did not vote for its beginning. We begin to feel our error now, since the details of what profligate party papers call glory, have come to our ears. This glory is fed upon the millions we have voted in the persons of our representatives. These tears and blood are the fruits of party subservience and compromise. Let the hireling writers of the public press visit the widows made in those late battles, and attempt to offer to them their delicate consolations. Let them smoothly say how sweet it must be to die in the discharge of duty, and to merit a grateful country's tears. Let them repeat the bewildering talk which is retailed with such profuse readiness by those who stay at home, and wield nothing heavier than their venal pens; by those who have forced brave men into a position where they must fight for bare life and safety—like burglars whom you intercept upon your threshold; and then let them ask these suffering relatives if they do not now rejoice that the supplies were voted, which have so completely covered the dead with glory. Methinks the humblest widow of the commonest and most deluded soldier, whom our supplies transported to the shambles of Mexico, might teach these coarse orators and editors to despise their language. How dreadful are the annals of wars which

are waged even for the principle of self-defence ! Rare as they have been, since men have almost always fought from meaner motives, yet the misery they produced has been vast enough to quench the glory of all the world's victories, and to blight the greenest laurels. But how much more agonizing to the hearts of the survivors, must be the thought that these fell fighting against self-defence, in a war which is the last brazen link in the fierce policy of slavery. And this is called glory ; and it is for this that we elected men to vote supplies—forsooth, because the party nominations left us no alternative. We saw no grounds for making a change ; we rather smiled at those who had an extra conscience in the matter ; we blindly swore allegiance to the ticket, when we knew what the result would be ; we did not dare to follow conscience, and emancipate ourselves from party trammels. Here is cause for humiliation ; and happy is the man who did not cast that bloody vote, instead of persuading himself that, on the whole, the names were as good as could be found. Miserable trickery of party, which cheats even well-meaning men out of their own conscience, and renders those who would not crush a fly, accessories to misery and war !

But the present position of affairs will teach us, if we are willing to hear its lesson, that our chief ground for humiliation to-day, does not reside in this particular war, or in any single act or measure, but rather in certain faults and fallacies of ours which render all wars, and every warlike party-measure, possible. I will not present the points which seem to me to be fairly deducible from the late events, and from the manner of their consummation. The moral drawn from them comes too late for the present need : but it may become a rich experience for the construction of our future history. We may make, then, the general statement, that the logic of the political convention always postpones the

best thing that *should* be done for the next-best thing that apparently *can* be done, or for still lower degrees of that which is expedient. The finest compromiser is the most available man. The simple conscience is too millennial to do service for the next election. There is no faith in the providential issues of truth, but even God must be made available. The sacrifice of the next-best thing for the only true thing is never made. A partizan is a man who never reflects that God will conduct the country's fortunes if he will only act out his purest thought, or refuse to do that which is only available. God is not a great compromiser, but His action is based upon immutable verities, which the passions of mankind—the opposition—can never indefinitely postpone. He does what is pure justice at every moment, and waits for the issues, conscious that what it is purely right to do it is proper to do. He teaches us that it is easier to do a simple good thing, or to abstain from the next-best thing—which is the same—than to balance probabilities, particularly if we have to sanction some great wrong for the sake of some considerable good. In fine, He makes a millennial conscience the judge of present expediency. It is nothing but our want of faith in this great principle, which feeds, and promises to feed, the life of slavery. It is nothing else which votes the supplies for every war. We will not suffer our opposition to some measure, or our abstinence from some projected policy, to assist the plans of God, which keep the future good as the result of present conscientious sacrifice: but we attempt to force providence by resigning conscience for the next-best thing.

From this general statement we can descend to some of the particulars which it includes. Furnished with it, let us analyze, for instance, the war spirit: and our results will be seen to apply to all partizan policy, since that seeks



either to wrest a good from providence by evil means, or to do only that which is available.

The war spirit is composed of three elements :—First, the animal love of fight : second, a mistaken notion of honor : third, a perverted sense of justice. That analysis includes every element which makes the profession of arms, or which impels the civilian to thank God and to shout at a famous victory. We need not spend much time in discussing the first,—it is neither flattering nor pleasant to be reminded that, in any thing, we emulate the brute creation, and sometimes even out-Herod Herod. The love of opposition, whose worst form is the love of fight, is a sad inheritance of the animal nature, the link between man and the unreasoning quadruped, who still rarely fights except to gratify his hunger. It is an impulse which is chiefly kept alive and active by certain intellectual errors, soon to be mentioned ; any thing in the likeness of a man must first imagine there is something to fight for, else he is not at the trouble. And the presence of Christianity in the world, like the prophet among the lions, has so far cowed and modified this impulse, that we may safely say, that although the recital of ancient fights and deeds falsely called heroic, still sends an animal thrill through the nerves of the excitable youth, and though the pulses of martial music can still almost deify the wrong ; yet, without the presence of these intellectual errors—the last remnants of barbaric thought, to glorify the crime and cheat the conscience—no man would fight. As the human intellect becomes more sanctified, even the love of opposition will be an unpardonable breach of manners ; and, notwithstanding the literature of the race, and its chosen memories, and even its most stirring metaphors, are warlike, yet the animal impulse will finally yield to the highest and hardest requisition of Christian love. Even now, almost any man will

assent to the simple proposition, that the law of love ought to be supreme. He will begin by saying, because his heart compels him, that war is a violation of that law, and its spirit a most disastrous one ; but—and here the man begins to argue, because his head will interfere, and so long as that head is subject to certain errors and misconceptions, the law of love in his heart will never be practised in its broad and noble Christian sense. How needful, then, it is,—in fact, the only thing the case demands,—to clear away the intellectual rubbish, and to substitute lawful Christian premises for the mind's operation. This brings us to the second element in the war spirit,—a mistaken notion of honor. Leaders of party know very well how to move this spring,—turgid and time-serving orators can vault into place by its rebound. If it crushes human hearts, and dabbles the garments of the state in blood, there are fine catch-words of honor, patriotism, and right, to make us think those hearts a sacrifice well pleasing to God, and the steam of that blood, a savour of incense to the Lord of Hosts. Let us analyze the popular sentiment of honor. Ask a man if he believes in the law of love and the peaceful compromise of injuries, and this will be his answer :—“ Yes, I believe in that law, promulgated by trump of angels long ago. I believe that it ought not to be heralded by trump of war, and peace *has* her greater victories ; and Christ did speak from the earnest fulness of his persecuted spirit when he said,—‘ Blessed are the peace-makers ;’ but then, my Christian friend, *our honor* is at stake ; the eyes of Europe,—of the world,—are upon us. We cannot compromise our dignity, and disgrace ourselves into a hissing and a bye-word. In fine, we must fight, gospel or no gospel ; the stern necessity is imposed upon us ; we must vindicate the national honor, or else be blotted from the roll of nations.” Such is the recruiting drum and fife with

which the so-called patriot leads men captive. Honor is the hardly-used word which fills the ears and bewilders the consciences, and beats the ploughshares of a peaceful nation into swords, as if they needed human blood to fertilize the soil of their tillage. This is the worst error of the human head, because it is so fine and contagious. Most commonly, however, the error takes this form—that, though we may be wrong, honor permits no retreat or repentance. But yet, men are not willing to teach their children this, any more than they are willing to teach them to love strong drink. Every father who yearns to promote his child's true honor and welfare, will explain to him the true Christian doctrine of retreat from a bad promise or a wicked oath. He will teach him that the only true way of escaping from a false position, is, not to persist in it, but to escape from it; and this, he himself feels, in his cool moments, to be the only proper and manly course.

But what can it be which alters the case when we come to act as citizens and not as parents? What juggle is it which substitutes a corrupt and senseless code for this plain Christianity? Why take the position that, to become implicated in a measure, pledges us to sustain it and carry it out? Because it is a plain matter of fact, beyond all argument or explanation, that the intellect has inherited a worldly notion of honor, side by side, and at variance, with that of the moral sense: and it deludes those men most thoroughly, who have much party feeling and strong nationality, and who are apt to be excited by the false patriotism of a newspaper paragraph. Such a man, backed by the sympathy of numbers, commits that which he would have punished in his child. He throws his vote, which helps to maintain his government in a false position, because there is a prevalent fiction that governments never retreat—it is very well for private men now and then to luxuriate in

Christianity; but governments must never flinch—they must have a stern and single purpose, and carry out, for their own credit, what they have commenced. For their own credit, indeed! As if any sane man could esteem a persistency in error creditable, or mistake it for that firmness which is both the glory and the policy of a government when it pursues the right! It is this very firmness and persistency which the citizen needs as a salutary check upon the abuse of power: and he is not a true citizen who refuses to employ it to retrieve his country's errors.

And to-day we do not feel humiliated because we lacked the firmness which might have arrested the tide of war, but because our weakness helped to swell its volume. We have been the victims of that false honor which finds it easier to persist in evil than nobly to repent. The sneers of men are more potent with us, than the smiles of God.

But perhaps the false idea of honor,—the idea of the feudal champion, the modern duellist, and the demagogue,—is not so prevalent now as formerly. Appeals to the feeling do not now move men so universally and certainly. Few, except the impetuous, the unthinking or the designing, are likely to become its blind and irreclaimable votaries. But there is another intellectual error, the third element of the war spirit, which is more universally diffused, and which is held by men of greater stability, both of thought and conscience: the perverted sense of justice. They say rightly, that to obtain justice is to vindicate God—let justice be done, though the heavens fall. It is the very condition of social existence and the moral order of the universe. We will have justice at whatever cost: we will repel injustice at whatever sacrifice; else we should disown the power and the truth of God within us, and be unjust ourselves. Granted—the whole of it. It is a noble position always: justice at whatever sacrifice. No man can refuse to de-

mand that justice shall be established, without making himself below justice and unworthy of it. But here, my friends, the gospels interfere; and we gather from their spirit that the highest justice is that which is due from man to God. In seeking justice, fail not to do justice to the laws of virtue. Justice at whatever sacrifice does not mean justice at the expense of any crime. The moment that we find our sacrifice for justice is to involve a single moral lapse, we must abandon its pursuit, because the laws of virtue are superior to our private aims of justice. If the chief reason for establishing justice is to establish moral order—all other motives being purely selfish and temporal—then we must see that no moral disorder is committed in the process. Otherwise, we are guilty of the practical paradox of gaining virtue at the expense of crime. Our position certainly is, justice at any expense: but to that the gospels add another saving clause—except the expense of crime. Without that clause, the grossest injustice would be daily committed in the name of virtue. Many an atrocity has been perpetrated in the name of liberty—many a noble man and woman has been burnt in the name of God—many a war has been waged in the name of justice.

There is great danger, too, grasping and unscrupulous as men generally are, particularly when in a passion, that they call that justice which is only self-interest. There is great danger that they dignify the most bloodthirsty ambition by that holy name; and, furnished with a pretext, wage, in the name of God, a war, with the objects and spirit of Satan himself. But let that pass; and let us suppose a case in which some palpable injustice has been committed towards us,—a downright injustice, without a shadow of excuse or provocation, and no negotiation or arbitration can reinstate us in our rights, or grant us com-

pensation. A very strong case you will perceive, and all on one side. Past history rarely affords us such a case of pure, groundless, unprovoked injustice; and the spirit of modern times will hardly permit its occurrence. But suppose that it does occur; what is our alternative? what is the last appeal? The patriot cries, to arms! the last appeal is force. Justice at any sacrifice; our rights must be enforced by the argument of the bayonet. We must *take* what will not be bestowed. This may be the earnest position of a conscientious man, with no alloy of passion or improper motives, but in a righteous indignation at violated right. It *may* be. What shall we answer? Without stopping by the way to show, as we might do in numerous instances, that wars, undertaken with that motive, have failed to procure the right involved, or settle the mooted point, but have been followed by a peace that only restored both parties to the state in which they were before the war—thus proving that an appeal to force is by no means an infallible way of getting justice,—without dwelling on that interesting point, there is this simple answer to be made: in your attempt to secure justice, you are about to commit the grossest injustice within the ability of man. To establish your rights, unquestioned as they may be, you are about to commit more crimes, and violate more laws of God, than can be warranted by the establishment of any right or justice whatsoever. You are about to become, *in your turn*, most unjust and criminal; and however strongly public opinion may support you, however loudly the sweet voices of the mob may second the murderous charges of your steel, your so-called pursuit of justice is abominable and hideous in the sight of God. It violates the very fundamentals of the gospel; it loads your soul with the weight of more crimes than the sense of gratified revenge, or even the establishment of your cause, can ever cancel, or

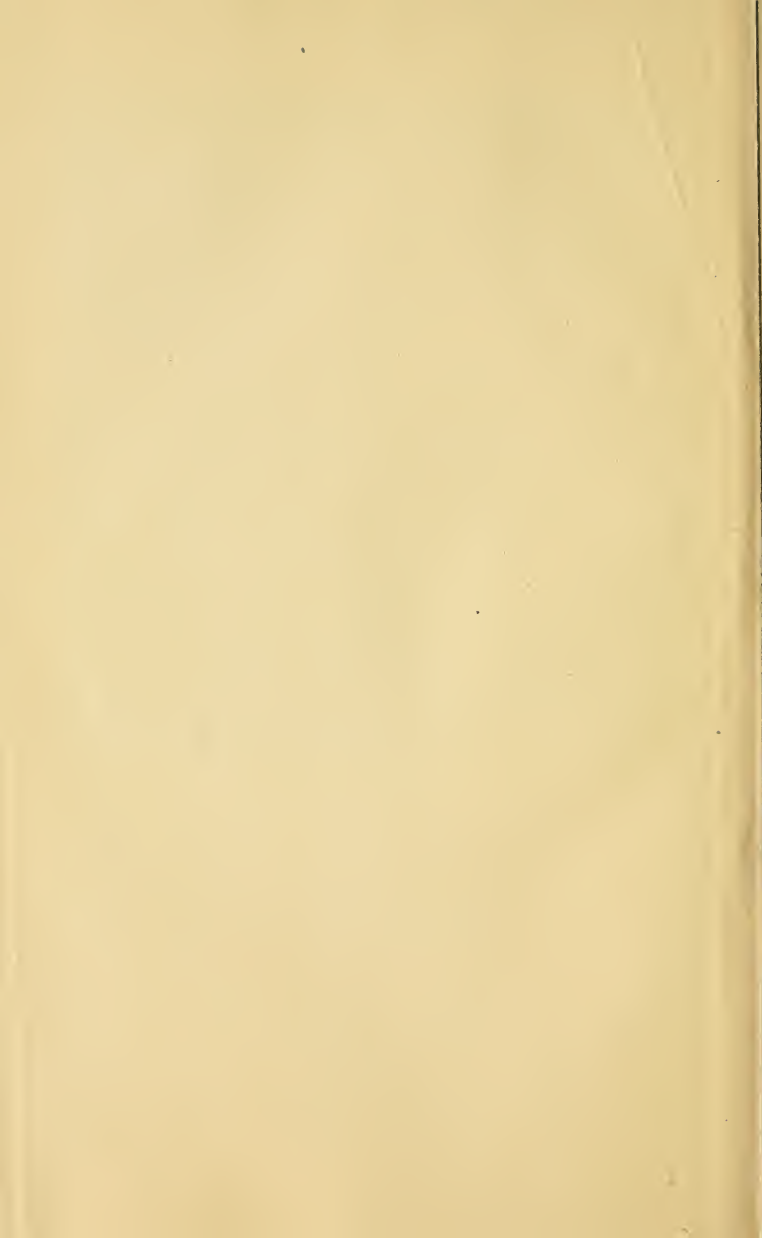
atone for. Be assured, however good the thing for which you aim, you could not do worse things to get it, and therefore you are not justified in your last argument of force. Now, it is very true that the popular feeling, the popular pride, the whole tone of thought, the whole custom of the race, is dead against such a position as that; there have been times when a man's sanity was suspected for assuming it. But nevertheless, my friends, consider, with minds unclouded by the false fumes of glory, not inebriated by all the victories in the name of justice, consider. The last resort of war breaks the sacredest laws of God: it turns men into beasts: it murders, it ravages, it inflicts many shades of misery, it subverts the whole system of moral order. The cool obedience of the soldier compromises the parties to the deepest atrocities that are ever committed in the foulest causes; it covers with blood every page of the gospel. Is your pursuit of justice worth that sacrifice? Can such an alliance with that which is earthly establish that which is heavenly? No; the better sense, the calmer moments, of all mankind, answer, No. The free, unprejudiced intellect of the race will abhor the sacrifice, and substitute the Christian position,—justice, at any expense of time, of money, of patience, of forbearance, of smiting and reviling; but no justice,—rather the endurance of injustice,—than the commission of outrageous crimes.

In conclusion: all social and public, as well as private matters, depend upon this point: can a good end *ever* justify evil means? can a considerable good ever justify a partial compromise of conscience? and it is a principle of our religion, seen by all of us in our moments of sanity, that it cannot. The race retrogrades instead of advancing, when it gains anything by unjust means, because to do so involves injustice. Its material aggrandizement will poorly balance its moral deterioration. Its available men and measures

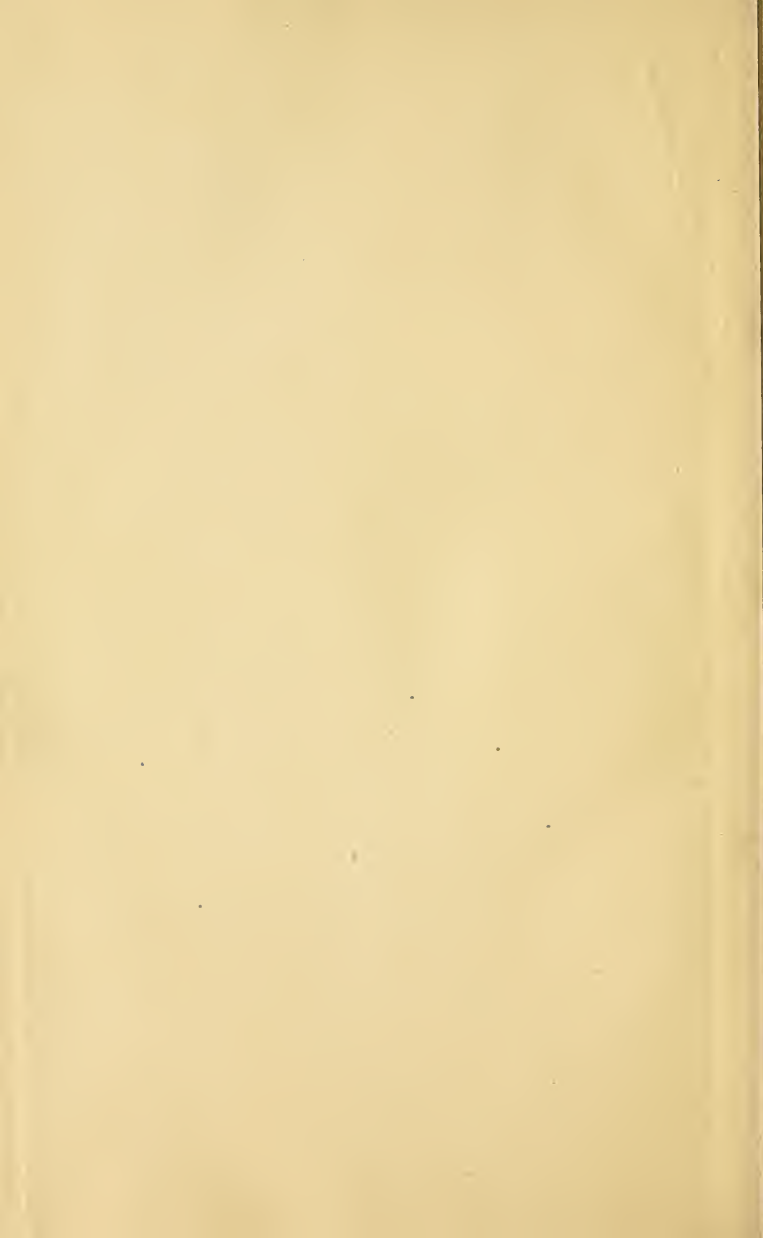
will themselves execute judgment upon a violated sense of right. If some law of God has been repealed, we are not at liberty, on pretence of righting matters, to repeal His far greater and more stringent laws. We are in no case, whether the end be great or small, at liberty to stifle the faintest whisper of our conscience. Is not this a plain and righteous principle; does it not exhaust the whole matter, and supply us with a test for all time? Can we tamper with it, and attempt to qualify it, and reason away its stringency, and escape its conditions, without subverting all principle, destroying the difference between right and wrong, and leaving every page of the gospel at the mercy of a time-serving logic? No: we must put faith in that great principle of private conscience, hard as it is—yet all untried and dubious as its practice is. If it is a principle of Christ, we must apply it, come what may. Any man who pretends to believe in principles at all, cannot escape from that one, without levelling the fair fabric of moral order, and annulling every gift of God to the race. But generations will come who will find its practice easy and ennobling—a kingdom *in* this world, though not *of* it; but only on condition of *our* previous faith.

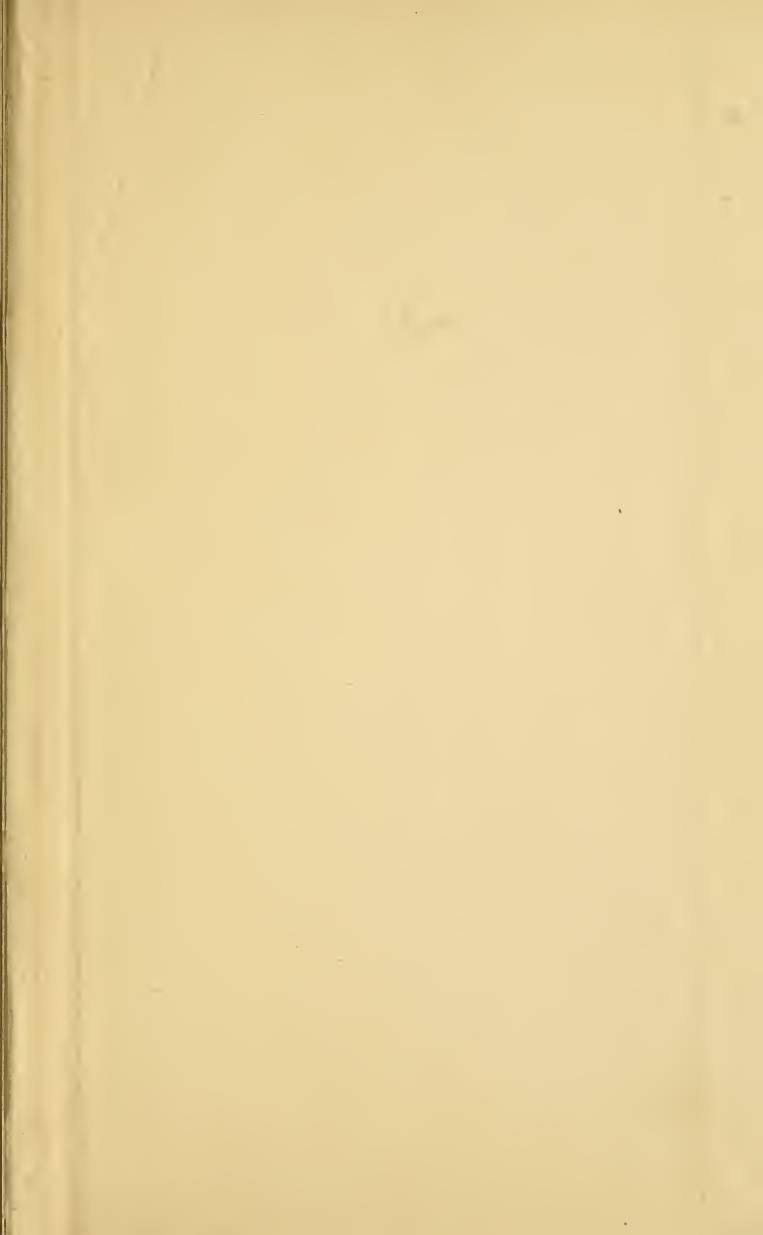












LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 897 181 4

